

Racial attitudes in response to thoughts of white privilege

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Abstract

Thinking about the benefits gained from a privileged group membership can threaten social identity and evoke justification of the existing status difference between the ingroup and a disadvantaged group. For White Americans, racial privilege may be justified by concurring with modern racist attitudes. In Experiment 1, White Americans randomly assigned to think about White privilege expressed greater modern racism compared to those assigned to think about White disadvantage or a race-irrelevant topic. In Experiment 2, we found that increased racism in response to thoughts of White privilege was limited to those who highly identified with their racial category. In contrast, when White racial identification was sufficiently low, thoughts of White privilege reliably reduced modern racism. We discuss the implications of these findings for the meaning of modern racism and prejudice reduction. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Considerable research has examined antecedents of White Americans' racial attitudes (Biernat & Crandall, 1999; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Kluegel & Smith, 1982; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). One potential antecedent of racial attitudes that has received little attention is the identity concerns that can arise when Whites confront their *privileged position in the social structure*. Although Whites consistently fare better than racial minorities on indicators of wealth and social status (Farley & Allen, 1987; Killian, 1990; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sigelman & Welch, 1991), McIntosh (1992) has argued that Whites do not readily perceive their benefits as stemming from privilege. Thus, encouraging Whites to think about their privilege may evoke identity threat for doing so places the ingroup's deservingness in question. Such implied benefits at the expense of another group could represent a threat to the moral value of the ingroup (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Accordingly, when Whites are confronted with racial inequality that they benefit from, they may respond to this threat to their group's position with increased racism.

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RESPONDING TO THOUGHTS ABOUT WHITE PRIVILEGE

When Whites think about the ways that they are privileged, two rather distinct responses are plausible: *either increased or decreased racism*. There are several theoretical reasons why confronting privilege might reduce racism. Thinking about one's relative privilege could activate equity concerns, and thereby motivate Whites to display greater egalitarianism (Katz & Hass, 1988; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). In addition, focusing on the ingroup's illegitimate benefits might evoke collective guilt (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005), which can increase positive responses toward the disadvantaged group. Thus, to the extent that Whites consider their benefits illegitimate, thinking about privilege might be expected to reduce racism.

Despite such reasons for predicting that reminders of White privilege might reduce racism, the activation of Whites' own identity concerns could result in the opposite effect (Branscombe, 2004). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) argues that social groups are an important basis of self-definition, and the ingroup's position in the social structure can have important affective consequences (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Although being in a high status group can result in a positive social identity, to the extent that the ingroup's achievements are tainted by illegitimacy, then making salient the ingroup's privileged status could represent a threat to social identity. By making it difficult for Whites to maintain their 'innocence' about the unfairness of their racial group's favorable position, thoughts of privilege could imply that their group is immoral. Indeed, Branscombe (1998) found that when privileged group members thought about their unjustified group-based advantages, their group identity was harmed. Further, the perception of illegitimate ingroup privilege suggests that the ingroup will lose status if intergroup relations become more just, thus threatening the security of the ingroup's high status position. When the status relations between groups are insecure, dominant groups may be especially oppressive in their attempts to maintain their favored position (Jackman, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Brown, 1978).

One strategy of defense against the threatening suggestion that the ingroup illegitimately obtains benefits at the expense of another group would be to challenge the deservingness of the disadvantaged group (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Guimond & Dambrun, 2002; Johnson, Terry, & Louis, 2005). Thus, when contemporary White Americans have to face their privilege, they may defend the image of their racial ingroup by denying that illegitimate discrimination plays a significant role in individuals' outcomes—in other words, they may show increases in modern racism. Endorsement of modern racist beliefs involves a denial that the existing racial inequality is due to discrimination and an assessment that Blacks are making illegitimate demands for change (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; Henry & Sears, 2002; McConahay, 1986). We propose that increased modern racism—as a denial of illegitimate racial inequality—can function as a justification of White privilege.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

In two experiments, we asked White Americans to think about the ways that they benefit from White privilege, and then assessed its consequences for modern racism. In a comparison condition, participants were asked to describe the ways they are disadvantaged because they are White. This White disadvantage condition makes race salient as the privilege condition does, but it is unlikely to evoke social identity threat because the disadvantages considered are likely to be rare and have little impact on the participants' lives. In Experiment 1, we also included a race-irrelevant control condition where participants were simply asked to describe their life experiences. Because denying that

discrimination is the source of racial inequality can protect the value of White racial identity, we predicted that modern racism would be highest when participants' racial identity was threatened by thoughts of White privilege. In Experiment 2, we assessed whether the effect of thinking about White privilege is moderated by White racial identification. The motivation to justify White privilege should be strongest among those most invested in their racial identity. Therefore, when participants have to consider their racial privilege, higher levels of White identification should lead to increasing endorsement of modern racism as a justification of their benefits.

EXPERIMENT 1

To manipulate perceptions of the ingroup as privileged, we varied the kinds of thoughts participants were asked to generate concerning their racial group. In the White privilege condition, participants generated the ways in which they benefit from their racial group membership. Conversely, in the White disadvantage condition, participants generated disadvantages they experience based on their racial group membership. In a race-irrelevant control condition, participants described their life experiences. We expected that Whites' racial identity would be threatened in the White privilege condition, but not in the other two conditions. We therefore predicted that modern racism would be higher in the White privilege condition compared to either the White disadvantage or control conditions.

Threat Pretest

To ensure that writing about White privilege was indeed perceived as more threatening than writing about White disadvantage, we randomly assigned 20 White undergraduates (6 males; 14 females) to receive one version of the writing task instructions used in our subsequent experiments (e.g., White privilege or White disadvantage). Given people's reluctance to admit feelings of threat about themselves, we asked our participants to indicate 'the emotional response this task would evoke in most White Americans.' Using a 1 (would not feel at all) to 9 (would feel very much) scale, participants rated how distressed, threatened, upset, defensive, and argumentative White Americans are likely to feel in each of the two race salient conditions. A mean for this threat index was computed, and a 2 (condition: privilege vs. disadvantage) \times 2 (participant gender) analysis of variance was performed. As with all subsequent analyses reported, participant gender did not qualify our condition effects so this variable is ignored. Only the main effect of condition was significant, $F(1,16) = 6.59, p < 0.021$. Participants who read the White privilege writing task instructions expected that White Americans would feel more threatened ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.81$) than those who read the White disadvantage writing task instructions ($M = 2.77, SD = 1.51$).

Method

Participants and Design

White undergraduates (93 females; 96 males) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the privilege and disadvantage conditions they were asked to write about the ways they have been either privileged or disadvantaged because of their racial group membership. In the control condition, participants were asked to write about their 'life experiences.' Participants received credit toward their introductory psychology research requirement.

Procedure and Measures

In the privilege condition, the instructions read (with the disadvantage condition instructions shown in brackets): 'We would like you to think about and consider the ways that you have received *privileges or been advantaged* [not received *privileges or been disadvantaged*] because you are *White/Caucasian*. Write down as many different ways as you can think of that you have *benefited or been advantaged* [not *benefited or been disadvantaged*] because of your race.' Those assigned to the control group read the following instructions: 'We would like you to think about and consider the types of *life events that you have experienced*.'

After the thought-listing task, participants responded to the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986). Responses to the following items were made on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale: 'Discrimination against Blacks is no longer a problem in the United States'; 'Over the past few years Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve'; 'It is easy to understand the anger of Black people in America' (reverse-scored); 'Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights'; 'Blacks should not push themselves where they are not wanted.' Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflect greater racism ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Results

Thought Content

Two coders assigned each of the thoughts generated in the two experimental groups to one of eight categories, with an agreement rate of 94%. The total number of thoughts generated, regardless of content, differed significantly by condition, $F(1,118) = 14.12$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.674$. More thoughts were generated in the privilege condition ($M = 2.85$; $SD = 2.24$) than in the disadvantage condition ($M = 1.58$; $SD = 1.44$). This was the case for all the content categories shown in Table 1, except for the education category, which showed the reverse pattern, and the organizations category, which did not differ by condition. Two additional categories assessed respondents' failure to generate condition-relevant experiences, either by explicitly denying having had any such experiences or by citing experiences opposite from those requested. The number of thoughts generated in each of these categories did not differ by thought condition.

The thoughts generated in the privilege condition centered on how negative stereotypes are avoided by being White, how obtaining well-paying jobs and satisfactory housing is less difficult than it is for Blacks,

Table 1. Mean number of thoughts generated within each content category in the privilege and disadvantage conditions

Thought category	Experiment 1			Experiment 2		
	Privilege	Disadvantage	$F(1,117)$	Privilege	Disadvantage	$F(1,277)$
Social stereotyping	1.48 (1.53)	0.60 (0.87)	15.82, $p < 0.001$	1.28 (1.31)	0.62 (0.89)	24.69, $p < 0.001$
Education	0.25 (0.44)	0.49 (0.68)	4.98, $p = 0.028$	0.33 (0.56)	0.55 (0.71)	8.16, $p = 0.005$
Employment	0.38 (0.63)	0.18 (0.39)	4.80, $p = 0.030$	0.41 (0.68)	0.16 (0.39)	14.10, $p < 0.001$
Housing	0.42 (0.75)	0.10 (0.31)	9.95, $p = 0.002$	0.39 (0.75)	0.10 (0.30)	18.90, $p < 0.001$
Organizations	0.15 (0.46)	0.19 (0.43)	0.24, $p = 0.627$	0.15 (0.42)	0.21 (0.46)	1.33, $p = 0.250$
Authorities	0.17 (0.38)	0.01 (0.12)	10.17, $p = 0.002$	0.26 (0.49)	0.04 (0.20)	25.72, $p < 0.001$
Denial	0.44 (1.16)	0.51 (0.61)	0.16, $p = 0.694$	0.43 (0.94)	0.34 (0.55)	1.16, $p = 0.282$
Converse	0.15 (0.41)	0.15 (0.47)	0.01, $p = 0.956$	0.11 (0.34)	0.11 (0.46)	0.01, $p = 0.920$

and that poor treatment by the police can be avoided. In the disadvantage condition, the thoughts generated focused most on the possibility that they might be seen as racist, that affirmative action policies could influence scholarship availability and job prospects, and most rarely that they might be unsafe in non-White neighborhoods or that Black police officers might treat Whites worse than Blacks.

While no particular comparison group was implied by the task instructions, participants consistently and explicitly evoked Black Americans in generating the consequences of being White. The thoughts in the privilege condition focused almost exclusively on avoiding the disadvantages of being Black. Similarly, White disadvantages were conceptualized in terms of the perceived benefits of being Black, especially those that might stem from affirmative action. Hence, the thoughts generated involved the perceived consequences of being Black that are either avoided (in the privilege condition) or not obtained (in the disadvantage condition).

Effect of Thought Condition on Modern Racism

An analysis of variance revealed that modern racism scores differed by condition, $F(2,186) = 4.46$, $p = 0.013$. Modern racism was significantly greater in the privilege condition ($M = 2.74$; $SD = 1.05$) compared to the disadvantage condition ($M = 2.25$; $SD = 0.76$), $t(186) = 2.85$, $p = 0.005$, $d = 0.535$, and compared to the control condition ($M = 2.34$; $SD = 1.02$), $t(186) = 2.35$, $p = 0.020$, $d = 0.489$. The disadvantage condition and the control condition did not significantly differ, $t(186) = 0.54$, $p = 0.587$, $d = 0.018$. Because the total number of thoughts differed by condition, we also conducted an analysis of covariance controlling for the number of thoughts generated. Number of thoughts generated was not, however, significantly related to modern racism, $r = 0.05$, $p = 0.593$; including it as a covariate did not change the results.

Discussion

Reflecting their structurally privileged position, White participants reported more race-based privileges than disadvantages. This was true for most of the content categories, and for the total number of thoughts generated overall. Although Whites may not frequently or spontaneously consider their racial privileges (Helms, 1992; McIntosh, 1992), our results show that Whites do acknowledge that they are relatively more advantaged than disadvantaged when they are explicitly asked to think about the consequences of their race.

Our prediction concerning the effect of thinking about White privilege for racial attitudes was strongly supported. Consistent with our pretest data, confronting White privilege is a threat to White identity and can evoke a defensive response—the highest modern racism scores were observed in the White privilege condition. We argue this reflects our participants' active attempts to protect their threatened racial identity by justifying racial inequality. Because modern racism did not differ between the White disadvantage and control conditions, we can conclude that this defensive response is not simply a matter of racial salience per se. Only White privilege thoughts, but not White disadvantage thoughts, resulted in increased modern racism relative to the control condition.

EXPERIMENT 2

If responding to White privilege with increased racism reflects attempts at identity protection, then such responses should be most pronounced among those who are invested in that group identity. Thus, when

Whites are confronted with their privilege, the degree to which they attempt to justify their group's position is likely to be moderated by degree of White racial identification. Those lower in racial group identification should be less motivated to defend their group's image and should be therefore less likely to show a defensive response. When the motivation to protect the ingroup's identity is sufficiently low, then thoughts of White privilege may reduce modern racism by evoking collective guilt (see Powell et al., 2005). In contrast, those who are higher in White racial identification will be more likely to attempt to justify their group's superior outcomes by endorsing modern racist beliefs.

In order to test our moderation hypothesis, a reliable measure of White racial identification was needed and was not available in 1997 when these experiments were conducted. Therefore, in a separate sample, we first asked White undergraduates (198 women; 148 men) to complete five items that we created to assess White racial identification. Participants responded to the items on a 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) scale. As shown in Table 2, all of the items loaded highly on a single factor, accounting for 66% of the variance in these items, $\alpha = 0.87$. In the privilege condition where White identity is threatened, we predicted that White identification would be positively related to modern racism. In the disadvantage condition, where the ingroup does not face identity threat, level of identification should not predict modern racism (Turner, 1999). Therefore, the predicted effect of increased racism in the privilege condition should be strongest among those most highly identified as White. When, however, racial group identification is sufficiently low, privilege thoughts should reduce modern racism relative to thoughts of disadvantage.

In addition to assessing whether White identification moderates the effect of thought condition on racial attitudes, we test the potential role of political orientation. Conservatives might exhibit increased racism because confronting privilege threatens their belief in individual responsibility (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986). Conversely, liberals might be most likely to feel guilt and show decreased racism when confronted with their unearned benefits (Steele, 1990). To assess these possibilities, we measured both political orientation and White identification and tested each as possible moderators of the condition effect on modern racism.

Method

Participants and Design

Undergraduates (156 females; 123 males) were randomly assigned to describe their experiences with White privilege or White disadvantage. After listing their thoughts, participants completed measures of political orientation, White racial identification, and modern racism.

Table 2. Factor loadings for the White racial identification measure

White racial identification items	Factor loadings	
	Pre-test ($N = 246$)	Study 2 ($N = 275$)
1. I am comfortable being White.	0.83	0.83
2. Being White just feels natural to me.	0.85	0.84
3. I believe that White people have a lot to be proud of.	0.73	0.82
4. I feel good about being White.	0.88	0.88
5. I am not embarrassed to admit that I am White.	0.77	0.45

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed the thought-listing task following the same instructions used in the previous experiment where they were asked to describe the ways they have been privileged or disadvantaged because they are White/Caucasian.

Political Orientation Participants rated their political orientation ('Politically, I would say I am...') on a 1 (very conservative) to 6 (very liberal) scale.

White Racial Identification Participants completed the White identification items shown in Table 2 using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Scores on these items were averaged to create a White identification index, with higher numbers indicating greater White racial identification, $\alpha = 0.83$. As in the pretest sample, all five items loaded on a single factor that accounted for 61% of the variance in the items.

Modern Racism As in Experiment 1, participants completed the 5-item Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986). Participants responded to the items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale. Responses were averaged such that higher scores indicate greater racism, $\alpha = 0.75$.

Results

Thought Content

Two coders, working independently, assigned each of the thoughts using the same categories as Experiment 1, with a 97% agreement rate. As shown in Table 1, the thought content results replicated those obtained in Experiment 1. More thoughts were generated in the privilege condition ($M = 2.81$; $SD = 2.16$) than in the disadvantage condition ($M = 1.68$; $SD = 1.35$), $F(1,277) = 28.09$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.627$. Again, denial of relevant experience and thoughts converse of those requested did not differ by condition.

Main Effects of Condition

Replicating Experiment 1, modern racism scores were reliably higher in the privilege condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.03$) than in the disadvantage condition ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.83$), $F(1,275) = 6.00$, $p < 0.015$, $d = 0.289$. Political orientation did not reliably differ between the privilege ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.36$) and disadvantage conditions ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.36$), $F(1,272) = 0.08$, $p = 0.780$, $d = 0.029$. Likewise, White identification did not differ between the privilege ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 0.92$) and disadvantage conditions ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1,272) = 0.01$, $p = 0.971$, $d = 0.049$.

Regression Tests for Moderation

Using regression analyses, we assessed the extent to which White identification and political orientation moderated the effect of condition on modern racism. Following Aiken and West (1991), we

centered White identification and political orientation scores before conducting the analyses. Experimental condition was coded as -0.5 in the privilege condition, and $+0.5$ in the disadvantage condition. We regressed modern racism scores on political orientation, White identification, thought condition, the interaction between condition and political orientation, and the interaction between condition and White identification. Standardized regression coefficients for these analyses are reported below. Separate analyses including total number of thoughts as a predictor did not alter the findings, and number of thoughts was not a reliable predictor of modern racism, $\beta = -0.04$, $t(266) = -0.63$, $p = 0.530$.

Again, racism was higher in the privilege condition than in the disadvantage condition, $\beta = -0.14$, $t(267) = -2.45$, $p = 0.015$. White identification marginally predicted modern racism, such that racism increased as White identification increased, $\beta = 0.10$, $t(267) = 1.71$, $p = 0.089$. Both of these main effects were, however, qualified by the predicted interaction between White identification and condition, $\beta = -0.12$, $t(267) = -2.04$, $p = 0.043$. As illustrated in Figure 1, White identification positively predicted modern racism in the privilege condition, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(119) = 2.04$, $p = 0.043$. White identification did not predict modern racism in the disadvantage condition, $\beta = -0.03$, $t(148) = -0.32$, $p = 0.750$. Following Aiken and West (1991), we computed 95% confidence intervals around the regression lines for each experimental condition. Based on these confidence intervals, modern racism was higher in the privilege condition than in the disadvantage condition when White identification was greater than 6.58. When White identification was less than 3.83, modern racism was lower in the privilege condition than in the disadvantage condition. Thus, at the high end of the White identification scale, privilege thoughts increased racism relative to disadvantage thoughts. In contrast,

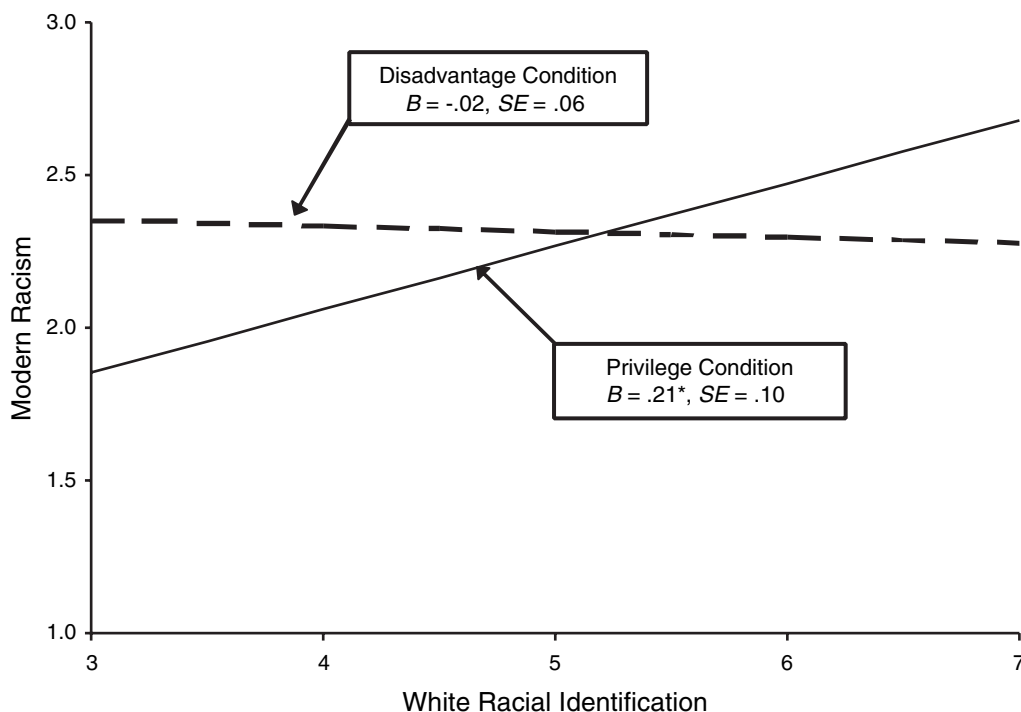


Figure 1. Modern racism scores as a function of White identification and thought condition, Experiment 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients are displayed in the Figure; standardized beta weights are presented in the text

when White identification was sufficiently low, privilege thoughts reduced racism relative to the disadvantage condition.

Political orientation reliably predicted modern racism, such that racism scores were lower the more that the participants described themselves as politically liberal, $\beta = -0.28$, $t(267) = -4.81$, $p < 0.001$. However, political orientation did not moderate the effects of condition; the interaction between political orientation and experimental condition was not reliable, $\beta = -0.07$, $t(267) = -1.18$, $p = 0.240$.

Discussion

Replicating Experiment 1, participants expressed higher levels of modern racism in the White privilege condition compared to the White disadvantage condition. In addition, the regression analyses revealed that the effect of contemplating White privilege on racism was moderated by racial group identification. In the privilege condition, where social identity was threatened, those who were high in White identification exhibited greater modern racism than did those lower in White identification. However, in the disadvantage condition, where threat to social identity was absent, White identification and modern racism were not related. Although thinking about White privilege evoked greater racism overall, for those participants who were sufficiently low in White identification, White privilege thoughts reduced modern racism compared to disadvantage thoughts. These effects are consistent with the notion that members of privileged groups can respond to thoughts of privilege either defensively by denying racial discrimination, or more sympathetically by admitting that discrimination exists. Which way Whites respond to reminders of their privilege depends on their degree of attachment to their racial identity. This is consistent with research showing that group identification moderates responses to social identity threat (Branscombe et al., 1999; Cameron, Duck, Terry, & Lalonde, 2005; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997).

Although political orientation did predict modern racism, we found no evidence that participants' political orientation moderated the effects of thought condition on modern racism. This suggests that responses to thinking about White privilege are specific to perceived threat to White racial identity rather than resulting from political orientation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two experiments we examined how confrontations with White privilege affected Whites' legitimizations of racial inequality. We found that participants expressed the most modern racism when they were first asked to generate the ways in which they benefit from being White. These results are consistent with social identity theory's contention that high status groups express the most negative attitudes towards lower status groups when their high status position is threatened (Hornsey, Spears, Cremers, & Hogg, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Brown, 1978). By expressing increased levels of modern racism, our participants attempted to justify racial inequality when they were threatened by confrontations with White privilege. Consistent with an identity-protection explanation, thoughts of White privilege increased racism the most among Whites who were highly identified with their race. Conversely, among those with sufficiently low White identification, thoughts of White privilege reduced modern racism compared to thoughts of White disadvantage. Furthermore, White identification *only* predicted racism when White identity was threatened by confronting White

privilege. This is consistent with Turner's (1999) argument that group identification will be more likely to predict outgroup attitudes when the ingroup's identity is threatened.

Implications for Understanding Modern Racism

Our research supports the notion that modern racist attitudes are *contextually dependent forms of legitimization* that can be mobilized to protect the social identity of privileged groups (see also Bourhis & Hill, 1982; van Knippenberg & van Oers, 1984). We found that reminders of White privilege caused an increase in modern racism, especially among those highly identified with their racial group. As first argued by Blumer (1958), our experimental data supports a conceptualization of racial prejudice as a 'sense of group position,' which entails legitimization of existing intergroup inequality. Thus, viewing modern racism solely as an individual difference may obfuscate the important role of group interest in evoking prejudiced attitudes. Indeed, our results suggest that it may be precisely at historical moments where social change is perceived as possible and minorities stand to improve their position in the social structure that Whites may be most likely to experience a threat to their social identity and display defensive increases in racism.

The effect of confrontations with White privilege on modern racism was contingent on the degree to which Whites valued their racial identity. However, the effect of White privilege thoughts was not moderated by participants' political orientation. This suggests that Whites' legitimizations of inequality occur in response to threats that are specific to their racial identity, rather than reflecting a violation of conservative political ideology per se (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986). Thus, we conclude that modern racism is an ideological attempt to protect ingroup interests, rather than a principled response free of group-based antagonism (see also Garcia, Desmarais, Branscombe, & Gee, 2005).

Implications for Attempts to Reduce Prejudice

Efforts to reduce racism often involve highlighting the existence of racial inequality. For Whites, however, pointing out their privileged position in the social structure represents a challenge to the status of the ingroup—precisely the context that our data suggest will increase racism. Thus, efforts at prejudice reduction should be most successful when either the motivation or ability to legitimize White privilege is low. Prejudice reduction efforts might be enhanced by direct challenges to the veracity of legitimizations (e.g., modern racist beliefs) that high status groups might employ to protect their identity. Our results suggest that prejudice reduction efforts may be most successful among those Whites who are relatively low in racial group identification and therefore are less motivated to protect White identity. While explicitly encouraging disidentification with one's racial group may be an impossible task, there may be other ways to undercut the identity-protective motivation that results in defensive justification of inequality. For instance, multicultural education and diversity training involve promoting inclusive superordinate identities as a means of inducing recategorization of former outgroup members as part of a higher order ingroup (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). When such superordinate identities are salient, people may attempt to protect the values of that identity, rather than their racial subgroup identities. Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr. employed this strategy in his attempts to influence White Americans by emphasizing the American identity that they share with Black Americans (Dyson, 2000). However, if the superordinate identity is defined with the dominant group as its prototype, then minority groups may be derogated as non-prototypical members of the superordinate identity (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). Thus, superordinate categorization will only block defenses of

White privilege when the superordinate identity is sufficiently heterogeneous and the diversity it contains is valued.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our participants uniformly chose Black Americans as their referent but, depending on the local context, Whites might frame their privilege in comparison to other minority groups (e.g., Hispanic or Asian Americans). Although we have no reason to expect that our main experimental finding concerning increased legitimization of inequality is limited to thoughts of Whites' position relative to that of Blacks, future research would benefit from examining responses to other types of group privilege. In addition to showing that justification of ingroup privilege is a general phenomenon, it would allow for an examination of how different forms of inequality might be legitimized in different ways. Although we focused on modern racism, other kinds of justification are possible and are likely to vary with context. Male privilege, for example, can be justified either with hostile responses toward women, or with 'benevolent' sexism (Glick et al., 2000). Research examining other forms of privilege and other forms of legitimization have the potential to strengthen our argument that the increased racism we observed in response to White privilege represents an attempt at legitimization rather than a more generally hostile response toward the outgroup evoking the threat. Indeed, inclusion of a measure that taps affective responses toward the target outgroup (e.g., a feeling thermometer), along with the modern racism scale which assesses primarily legitimization, would be helpful in differentiating between these two possibilities.

In addition, it should be noted that there are some forms of privilege that are relatively unlikely to evoke the defensive responses we observed. In cases where there are consensually accepted justifications for inequality, such as royal privilege, then thinking about privilege might be less likely to evoke a defensive response. Other forms of inequality in which the disadvantaged are seen as responsible for their stigma (e.g., weight, sexual orientation) may also be so well legitimized that reminders of privilege will not be experienced as threatening. Indeed, privileged groups are unlikely to experience threat when they consider their privilege, unless they see their relative advantage as potentially illegitimate (Branscombe et al., 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Investigators outside of psychology have given considerable thought to why Whites might be reluctant to confront their privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1991; Rothenberg, 2002). Although Whites may not often spontaneously think about their privileged position in the social structure (Helms, 1992; McIntosh, 1992), when prompted to do so they appear to be aware of their advantages. We predicted and found that Whites respond to reminders of their privileged status with increased modern racism, especially when they were highly identified with their racial group. When confronted with existing racial inequality, Whites justified their privileged status by denying the existence of discrimination, except when they were sufficiently low in White racial identification. In that case, thinking about White privilege reliably reduced modern racism. Further examination of the ideological consequences that can stem from threat to White identity promises to provide a new means of illuminating the dynamic nature of racist attitudes.

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